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ABSTRACT

A comparison of organizational leadership choices and decision-making behaviors faced by current educational leaders and by the literary figure Lord Jim is the focus of this paper. Conrad's protagonist, when confronted by three critical life decisions, chooses erroneously. Like Jim, organizational leaders confront critical incidents that demand decisions based on personal risk-taking. A conclusion of the paper is that leaders must first experience a personal "rite of passage" to develop honesty and integrity, and learn to balance romantic notions of leadership with realistic situations. (LMI)

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LORD JIM: RITE OF PASSAGE

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LEADERSHIP THROUGH LITERATURE

Lord Jim: Rite of Passage

By Frederick Gies

Jim "is one of us." He jumps ship and is compelled to live on.

Jim "is one of us." He spends much of his life reconciling what he dreams of being with what he is.

Jim "is one of us." He yearns for heroic exploits but experiences dull monotony.

Jim "is one of us." He believes himself courageous but fails the test at critical points in his life.

Jim "is one of us." He jumps.

Lord Jim was initially published in serial form in *Blackwood's Magazine* between October 1899 and November 1900, and subsequently in book form in 1900. Joseph Conrad (1857-1924), the author of *Lord Jim,* presents an impressionistic tale of a man who, when confronted by three critical decisions in his life, chooses erroneously. He fails each test. He is, unquestionably, a prisoner of romantic illusion. Conrad wants us to believe that Jim "is one of us," that almost everyone has jumped from some kind of *ship of decision*--some failure of courage in life.

Conrad's protagonist Jim is introduced as an impressive young man--an inch or so short of six feet tall, possessing a powerful physique, doggedly self-assertive, intellectually quick, quite popular, and apparelled in immaculate white from head to toe. Jim is characterized as a moral, ethical, and dedicated person.

Jim serves as a ship-chandler's water-clerk, that is someone who greets the captains of incoming ships and steers them to a particular store to replenish their supplies. Jim was wonderfully adept at his trade and was much appreciated by his employers.

To his employers and the captains whose trade he courted, he was known simply as Jim. However, Jim took great pains to hide his family name. His effort to be incognito "was not meant to hide a personality but a fact." When the "fact" was disclosed, Jim would pack up, leave his employ, and move to another seaport farther east--Bombay Calcutta, Rangoon, Penang, Batavia. But the "fact" inevitably followed him. Jim

migrated from one seaport to another "because he was a seaman in exile from the sea."

Eventually Jim found the presence of the "fact" intolerable, and sought the anonymity of a Malayan jungle village, far removed from traveled seaports and white men. There the natives added a new and rather majestic name to his. He became known as *Tuan Jim* or *Lord Jim*.

Jim was one of five sons in a parson's family. In this context Conrad captures the piety and peace of Jim's family life--and perhaps, an insight into the formulation of his character--when he observes: "Jim's father possessed such certain knowledge of the Unknowable as made for the righteousness of people in cottages without disturbing the ease of mind of those whom an unerring Providence enables to live in mansions."

After some light holiday reading, the youthful Jim concluded that the sea would be his vocation. He envisioned a career at sea affording him opportunities to accomplish heroic deeds such as rescuing people from storms, surviving shipwreck on a desolate island, quelling mutinies, and otherwise living a life of courageous adventure.

His family quickly accommodated his expressed interest in pursuing a career at sea by sending young Jim to a "training-ship for officers of the mercantile marine." Here Jim met with success and was generally popular. Then, for the first time, Jim--this outstanding specimen of humanity--confronts a critical decision. And. . .we discover "he is one of us." He jumps.

Like Jim, many organizational leaders must be regarded as romantics--yearning for lives that involve the performance of heroic and romantic exploits. . .pretending lives that consist more of fantasy than reality.

Too often and too soon reality intrudes when failure rears its ugly head. That failure frequently involves a test of courage. Failing the test, the leader--as did Jim--resorts to dreaming about future opportunities when true courage will be mustered. Yet, all the while the leader quietly and sometimes desperately attempts to reconcile what he does with what he could and should do. The discrepancy is often intolerable.

Jump. Save yourself. Don't risk it. Play it safe. Who cares? It doesn't matter. Next time. Avoid the fury. Do not challenge the savage capriciousness of organizational life. The sea is angry. Play it cool.

The romance of leadership persists. Like Jim's romantic love of the sea, which led him to believe he could tame its savage power, leaders often romanticize their roles and positions. Reality portends much monotony, boredom, and barrenness. Like the sea's sinister temperament,

organizations can often crash and smash and bash an individual leader's unique life. In fact, much like the sea, organizations seem to have a need to regularly but unpredictably manifest their furious power over their leaders. Romantic illusion is momentarily dashed, yet often springs forth another day.

Much like Jim, organizational leaders are confronted by a continuing flow of crucial moments and critical incidents. Each calls for a decision. Each involves a level of risk that places the decision-maker in jeopardy. Each must experience a "rite of passage" if the title **leader** is to be earned honestly and worn with integrity.

Each effective leader innovates, challenges the system and its values, attempting to alter the fundamental metabolism of the organizational culture--much like the true romantic who endlessly searches for the innate goodness of humankind. And therein may lie the noble but tragic flaw that blinds the leader's vision of rampant human ignominy. But, like Jim, too often the leader jumps. He "is one of us." He is compelled to live on. Altruism is dangerous, but what are the alternatives? Is there an innate goodness in humankind? Will I jump?

Jim's three critical decisions were of the simplest kind. They all involved the loss of human life, the first two his, and the third someone else's. The first decision involved his inability to act in helping to save people on a sinking ship. He froze, and the opportunity passed. Like the leader over-deliberating a decision, opportunity is lost never to be recaptured in the same context. "Too late," Jim's captain said. "Better luck next time." Jim jumped. Next time, he vowed to himself, he would be courageous. This time it would have been a waste. Too much risk. Too little return.

And the leader said: "Principle, nonsense! I pick my spots to take my risks so that the payoff will be maximized. I'm a winner. I keep my job. I plan to go to the top."

Jim's second critical decision was not significantly different from his first. Should he jump from the sinking ship on which he serves to save himself while hundreds of pilgrims drown? Like the other derelict crew members, he jumps. He "is one of us." Jim, this magnificent specimen who dreams of "valorous deeds" must now awake to live with himself. And. . .he must live with the full knowledge that others know that he is a jumper. Everyone knows the leader-jumper. He "is one of us." Perhaps, courage will come one day as part of the "rite of passage."

Unable to withstand the eyes of the world which perceived him as a disgrace, Jim flees to a distant and obscure world. Here, in time, he

prospers and becomes known as "Tuan Jim" or Lord Jim. He is much loved and revered as a leader in this primitive environment. Indeed, this change in jobs leads Jim to find himself and even recognize his own greatness. Here he quits jumping. . .at least uncourageously. . .for a while. He becomes a bold and audacious leader, a risk taker, an innovator, a synthesizer, an articulater of futuristic visions. He demonstrates great courage in a number of life threatening situations. He prevails.

Jim's final decision proves his essential goodness but requires the supreme sacrifice on his part. Erring in his judgment about the word of the notorious pirate Gentleman Brown, Jim displays compassion and spares his life. However, Jim thereby unwittingly causes the death of his friend Dain Waris, the son of the village chief Doramin. Jim does not anticipate Brown's treachery. In sparing Brown's life, Jim pledges his own to guarantee Brown's safety. In spite of Jim's dedication and fundamentally moral character, he makes the wrong decision. He jumps. He "is one of us." But. . .in this instance, is Lord Jim compelled to live on?

Jim's romantic illusions once again lead him to an erroneous decision. But this last error affords him a redeeming opportunity not present in his two previous failings of courage. He now must choose: Fight, flee, and save himself, or face death at the hands of his murdered friend's outraged father Doramin. The supreme romantic destiny finally confronts Lord Jim. He can now prove his own self worth without equivocation. He purposely chooses to pay the price. He *does not* jump. He "is **not** one of us." He demonstrates a strange but heralded rite of passage.

And what about leaders? A few achieve Lord Jim's status and pay one price or another. Most do not function at his level of moral courage and consciousness. Most join a form of apparent universality among humankind and jump, and jump, and jump some more. They are "one of us." They are compelled to live on in quiet desperation all the while trying to reconcile what they are with what they could or should or might be. They are "one of us."

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